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## Papa Lyman Remembers / The Great Depression

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# Papa Lyman Remembers

## The Great Depression

by Lyman Newlin (Book Trade Counsellor)



With the advance of years I see more and more written accounts of the history of my time on this earth. Frequently I have a quite vivid and, I believe, accurate memory of these events which are often as not written by people who weren't yet born at the time they are writing about. I suppose they have read newspapers, magazines, and books written by contemporaries of the events they are describing. Trouble is my memory and those memories of my contemporaries who are still around often don't jibe with the works of these historians. How many times have Gibbon or Macauley been worked over by revisionists? Roosevelt's New Deal is currently being lied about by the enemies of "socialized" medicine, etc. etc. For this **Charleston Conference Number 14** (does it seem that old to you?) issue of *ATG*, I thought some readers would be interested in a bookman's memories of the later days of the Great Depression as actually experienced by him.

I am not making any attempt to keep this column chronological. I write this as I prepare to head for the 46th Frankfurter Buchmesse and a few days rail-roading with **Fred Gullette** in Switzerland. Katina calls every half hour for copy. So here are a few snippets for future historians who write about books

during the 1930s and early 1940s.

In 1933, my first year in the trade, **Hervey Allen's** *Anthony Adverse* was the runaway bestseller. We didn't carry new books in the Economy Book Store branch where I worked but once in a while we'd get a used copy and would mark it down to \$1.50 from the publisher's (Farrar) list price of \$3. Why do I mention *AA*? Well, I remembered Allen was an English professor, but I

didn't remember where. Imagine my surprise when my *Oxford Companion to American Literature* (by James D. Hart, 1941) revealed that Allen taught at our own beloved **College of Charleston!!**

I don't know if I ever sold a second-hand copy of *AA* to a librarian, but I like to think I did because out of town librarians who were staying in nearby hotels during their visits to Chicago's World Fair would often engage in conversation as they perused our stock. My first recollection of an attempt to sell a book to a library was to take a two-volume set of **Samuel Johnson's** *A Dictionary of the English Language*, up to Evanston to offer it to Northwestern University library. The set bore the original published date of 1775 and was, according to my boss, a first edition. The asking price was under \$200 but I was told that the collection already contained Johnson's first edition so no sale was made. The set was sent over to the main store where it was finally disposed of at what price I never learned.

By the time **Margaret Mitchell's** *Gone With the Wind* was published by Macmillan in May, 1936, I was business manager of Follett (Library) Book Company. Our buyer, **Sylvestre Watkins**, agreed with Macmillan salesman, **Jack Hamer**, that this novel of the Civil War would sell well to our public and school library customers. He bought several hundred copies in advance of publication and listed *GWTW* in our catalog, *A Guide to Good Reading*. this title became an immediate bestseller; over a

million and a half copies were sold in its first year (50,000 in one day!). It was the subject of the first big price cutting war that I remember. Chicago and New York department stores slashed the list price. United Cigar Stores advertised it at less than \$2. In spite of this popularity, some

reviews directed at school librarians declared the action and language was a little too strong (didn't Scarlett say "damn" or was it Rhett?). Follett Book Company

was stuck with a hundred or so copies. In those days, publishers were loathe to accept returns. My friend at Ernst Hertzberg and Sons Bindery, **Jim Orr**, Sr., came to our rescue and we sold him our overstock at a little below cost. Hertzberg (the parent of Hertzberg New Method) bound these copies of the first edition in various leather bindings and before long they were appearing in Marshall Field's book department at fancy prices.

Depression notes: Standard undergraduate textbooks listed at from \$3 to \$4 for such hefty texts as the thousand page world history text by Hayes and Moon (Macmillan). College textbook wholesalers included Wilcox & Follett, Chicago; Long's, Columbus, OH; Nebraska Book Co., Lincoln; Missouri Stores, Columbia, MO; Barnes & Noble, NY. These companies sent buyers to colleges large and small to buy back textbooks which were no longer adopted. Then the books were sold to other schools where they were still being used. This kind of traffic drove publishers crazy. Having been one of the buyers for Wilcox & Follett (the parent of Follett Book Co.) I could have told the publishers how to put wholesalers out of business: increase discounts from their measly twenty percent to the forty percent discount obtained on trade books. But I liked to make the end-of-semester trips to colleges in my area which included part of Ohio, and all of Kentucky and Tennessee and Virginia. Besides, what

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New York publisher would heed the advice of a \$22.50 a week second-hand book buyer?

If you think \$3 or \$4 is not too high a price to pay for a textbook, you weren't a student at one of Chicago's three City Junior Colleges during the Depression. To ease the financial burden of textbook buying, the libraries of the junior colleges regularly bought from 25 to 75 copies of the most widely used underclass texts and put them on reserve.

During the Depression the Chicago Board of Education bought most of its books for school libraries from Follett. There were at least two strong reasons: Wilcox & Follett was one of the few book companies in existence which would accept the slow payment of the Board, and our bid was always low because the Board allowed us to supply good used books (at lower discounts) on library orders. This reminds a country boy to recall the first time he was ever

treated to lunch by a publisher's rep. The McGraw salesman responsible for Follett invited me to lunch at the Palmer House Empire Room — a memorable happening, filet mignon, no less! The date was November 11, 1939. When we went into the hotel at noon, the weather was warm and sultry. When we left at about two o'clock, the temperatures had dropped to almost freezing. That was the never-to-be-forgotten "Armistice Day Storm" which killed several duck hunters along the Mississippi flyway.

In my last column I admitted to some publishing experience. My opus magnus was my first. I've never done a better book since. (I am not a publisher; I've only done about a dozen books in my life. And I was a pretty smart kid then, I guess.) In 1939 one of Chicago's top interior decorators, Sterling B. McDonald, contacted our Chairman (and founder of the dynasty), **Charles Walcott Follett** with a notion about a book he had developed to make color combination selection easier for the non-professional. McDonald had a long string of accomplishments, including the interior design of the Stevens Hotel on South Michigan Avenue. You know it now as The Conrad Hilton. I can't remember why C.W., as we lovingly called this

great man, chose me to head the project. But you can check *Cumulative Book Index* to find this entry: *McDonald, Sterling B. Color: How to Use It (with color chart in 72 colors and patented calipers for use in selecting color combinations), F, xii, 166p., buck, 12.50 Follett.* The calipers required a well 7" in diameter for housing. This well was cut into the 3/8 inch compact board used to make the front cover. Almost three yards of buckram were required to cover the front and back (thinner) boards. The text was printed on heavy varnished stock and 8 colors were used in the plates. Total cost of materials, printing and binding, was under six dollars. Such a book would cost a minimum of twenty dollars to manufacture in these times; at list it would fetch at least a hundred dollars. Years ago, I lent my copy of *Color* to friends who were redecorating their home. We moved or they moved and you know what happens to books lent. I offer a small reward and a huge thank you to anyone who can help me find a copy of this book.

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*"I offer a small reward and a huge thank you to anyone who can help me find a copy of this book."*

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In the late thirties, **Follett Book Company** arranged with a group of Rocky Mountain college libraries, headed by the staff of the University of Colorado, which included **Eugene Wilson**, **Ralph Ellsworth**, and **James Sandoe** to check their library book orders against Wilcox & Follett used book stock. If we could supply a title, we would ship it to the library at substantial discount, scratch it off the library's order and forward the order to the publisher designated if there were other titles on the order. Later, college libraries of the Pacific Northwest, lead by the director of the University of Washington Library, **Charles Wesley Smith**, joined the consortium. The plan worked well for a couple of years until World War II depleted the staffs of the libraries and Follett. Follett lent almost every able-bodied young man to the Armed Services and libraries did the same. Young ladies who were clerks and billers often failed to return after lunch. They had been lured away at wartime wages to help wire the holds in C57s then being made by the Dodge Motor Plant northwest of Chicago.

Wartime hiring encouraged the growth of labor unions. The CIO attempted to unionize what staff we had left, and I, unknowingly, violated almost every section of the Taft-Hartley labor act in successfully dissuading our staff from unionizing. (Even a pinko like me had to protect his job in those times!) During this confrontation, **Bennett Cerf**, cofounder and president of Random House, came to my aid in denying a CIO claim that Random House believed all publishing concerns and booksellers should be unionized. Cerf and I kept in touch until his sudden death in 1971.

During the Depression, many large midwestern city and county library systems came to Folletts with instructions to supply used copies (at deep discounts) on their orders when possible. **Rex Potterf**, director of the Ft. Wayne & Allen County (Indiana) library system, made regular visits with his selectors to go through our stock. Many other midwestern school, academic, and public libraries would do the same when they were in Chicago.

Some readers of *ATG* have heard me ridicule "magazines." Now I have to confess that from 1940 through 1942 I was business manager of *Review Index: a quarterly guide to professional reviews*. The editors were **Louis Kaplan**, reference librarian at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and **Clarence S. Paine**, librarian, Beloit College. Louis later became director at Wisconsin. I have recently learned from **Gene Dewey** (a Charleston Conference alumnus) that **Louis Kaplan** and **Franklyn Bright** (both of whom I mentioned in my last column) had died during the past year. Thus passed two men who were instrumental in making Wisconsin's one of the great collections of American history materials. I have been unable to find a trace of Clarence after he left Beloit to become director of a large public library system in Michigan.

That about finishes me and The Depression. Next time, I'll try to let you know about books during WWII and about what a great place the University of Minnesota was in the days of **Robert Penn Warren**, **Saul Bellow**, **Eric Bentley**, **Sinclair Lewis**, and with **Hubert Humphrey** as mayor of the city. ☼